

Coronavirus: The Church's Responsibility for the Community of Faith

By Richard J. Mouw

In a radio interview recently, the host asked me how, in a few words, I would characterize what has been happening to the churches during this coronavirus crisis. My response: “We are experiencing a teaching moment.”

He seemed to like my answer but did not give me a chance to expand on that observation. We are certainly in a situation where we can do some teaching. But perhaps more importantly, we are experiencing the opportunity to *be taught* some important things. And the real teacher in this situation is God himself.

I am convinced that the Lord wants very much for us to be learning some new things, if we are indeed willing to be taught.

Let me start with the basics in what we might learn, focusing our evangelistic outreach. I am finding many of my non-Christian friends to be very despairing these days. One of them put it recently to me in a very blunt manner: “I am feeling for the first time in my life that things are completely hopeless! I don’t see the end of this plague that we are experiencing. I have no reason to believe that the things I have hoped for in my life will ever happen!”

From a Christian perspective, this person had it exactly right. Things really are bad. We are in a mess. Humanly speaking, our situation does indeed feel hopeless. The coronavirus is bad enough, but when seen in connection to what look like irreversible developments in climate change and global political-economic realities it is difficult to think of solutions to the threats we face.

And many of the older intellectual props are gone. The kind of Enlightenment philosophical thought had encouraged many to trust in the power of human rationality is now widely proclaimed to be a delusion. Popular “smiley face” coping mechanisms fail to buoy our spirits. We are increasingly disillusioned with national leaders who seemed to offer hope to us in the not too distant past.

We Christians should be empathizing with all of that. But we also have more to say. There is a God who is sovereign ruler over all things, and that God still loves the world that he created. Someday the Lord will make all things new. Those who put their trust in Jesus can live in the confidence that there is indeed a happy ending to the story. These things, for us, capture the underlying reality of our present situation, and it may well be that the Holy Spirit is at work in new ways to open previously hardened hearts to the Good News that we have to share.

In order to be bearers of this wonderful message, though, we have to be open to the lessons we need to be learning as we ourselves go through this coronavirus crisis. What does the church need to be doing in order to equip God’s people to be his agents in our present context? One obvious area for learning has to do with our worshiping lives. It is not enough to long for a return to the way things were in our church life. Many of us are grieving these days over things we have lost as a worshiping people. Singing hymns robustly in crowded pews and in choir lofts. Listening to sermons with our eyes directed toward the pastor standing behind a pulpit or lecturn. Fellowship dinners. Youth camps.

Maybe some of things will fully return eventually, but it may never be exactly the way it was in the recent past. This means that we have to ask some important questions. What in our life together as a worshiping community are the non-negotiables if we are simply to *be* the Body of Christ?

It may even be that we are being blessed with the gift of thinking new thoughts about how to experience genuine community. My experience as a teacher of the younger generation of Christians is that while there is a continuing strong desire on their part for face-to-face connectedness, there is also an immersion in new ways of processing and strengthening relationships through “social media.” Many of us older folks have been forced in this time of quarantine to learn about how technological developments can foster new ways of communicating and relating to others. The future of the church may have something to do with our willingness to incorporate these new patterns of building and sustaining community.

Most important here is what is essential to equip us to be sent forth from our communal activities into our daily lives as disciples of Jesus Christ. The patterns that we experience in that daily world have obviously been significant changes. We have been saying for the past few years that we are experiencing greatly increased polarization in the larger culture. But now we have new tensions that we could not have imagined a year ago. Confrontations—sometimes even violent ones—over face masks. Deep concerns about how best to educate our children. Significant disagreements about which leaders to trust, and which kind of expertise we ought to be relying upon.

The expertise question is especially important for Christians to reflect upon in a careful manner. When I was growing up in the evangelical community, I was warned against simply accepting everything my high school teachers said on the question of the origins of human life. “Evolution” was a bad word. But these days many Christians have come up with new bad words relating to how we view scientific expertise: “climate change,” “quarantine,” “vaccination”—to name a few obvious ones.

The Covid-19 crisis has brought new kinds of faith versus science conflicts in the Christian community. And these are not primarily intellectual arguments about what may or may not have happened millions of years ago. They have to do, not only with urgent questions about public health and safety. but also, with perplexing concerns about choices that must be made about economic recovery.

Ronald Thiemann, who taught theology at Harvard, wrote in 1991 that it is important for local churches to serve as “schools of public virtue” where believers learn to “form the kind of character necessary for public life.” That insistence is even more important today. To be a Christian is to have strong convictions about some of the most important concerns of the human condition. And we need to speak clearly about why we believe what we believe. “Always be prepared,” the apostle tells us, “to give the reason for the hope that you have.” But then he adds immediately: “But do this with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3: 15).

A gentle and respectful spirit toward folks who are different from us is an increasingly rare commodity in public life today. We need to probe--employing the discerning power of the Spirit—beneath the angry shouting and name-calling to identify the deeper hurts, fears, and grievings that have invaded so many lives during this endemic. We can show them a different spirit, by a willingness to look critically at our own attitudes, which have on many occasions been mistaken. We can show how it is possible genuinely to listen to others with whom we disagree. We can point to a different way in addressing racial and ethnic concerns by reaching across divides in the awareness of our shared humanity. And we can demonstrate to others what it means to live in genuine hope when hopelessness has touched so many lives.

Jesus tells us that he came into the world so that those who follow him might live “more abundantly” (John 10:10). Speaking of a more abundant life may seem the

wrong sort of thing in this time of pandemic. But it may actually be just the right thing to be exploring among ourselves and offering to our neighbors in a spirit of hope. The abundance may well prosper among us to the degree that we are willing to learn new lessons, promote new patterns of community, and find new ways to grieve with those who grieve, while pointing to the One who has promised to “make his blessings flow far as the curse is found.”